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AUTHOR Kannapel, Patricia J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In 1990 the Kentucky General Assembly passed one of the most comprehensive and innovative reform laws in the nation, the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). Under this law, schools must meet state-defined goals to receive financial rewards. This paper presents findings of a 6-year, field-work study of education reform in four rural Kentucky school districts. Methods included interviews, observation, and document review. The data indicate that the reform effort has achieved and maintained momentum; funding for education has increased and become more equalized; instructional and curricular change has occurred; educators and parents report that students have become better writers and thinkers; family resource/youth services centers have met many student and family needs; and decision making has devolved to the school level. However, several critical issues remain. The state testing and accountability programs are not well accepted; finding time for reform is difficult; the primary program has not been implemented as intended; many educators and parents perceive that students are missing out on basic skills; and the emphasis on parent involvement at the local level has decreased. (Contains 25 references). (LMI)

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KENTUCKY EDUCATION REFORM AFTER SIX YEARS:

Positive Results, Critical Issues

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the

American Educational Research Association

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Patricia J. Kannapel
Lola Aagaard
Pamelia Coe

Appalachia Educational Laboratory
P. O. Box 1348
Charleston, WV 25325

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OVERVIEW

This paper is based on research findings and observations from six years of field work in four rural Kentucky school districts, as well as our knowledge of state-level happenings and other research on Kentucky education reform during that same period. We drew on these sources to identify those aspects of reform that have worked well, and those that are still problematic.

Positive Results

1. The reform effort has achieved and maintained momentum.
2. Funding for education has increased and become more equalized.
3. Instructional and curricular change has occurred.
4. Educators and parents report that students have become better writers and thinkers.
5. Family resource/youth services centers have met many student/family needs.
6. Decision-making has devolved to the school level.

Critical Issues

1. The state testing and accountability programs are not well-accepted.
2. Finding time for reform is difficult.
3. The primary program has not been implemented as intended.
4. There is a perception among many educators and parents that students are missing out on "basic skills."
5. Parent involvement has been emphasized less at the local level over time.

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BACKGROUND

In the spring of 1990, the Kentucky General Assembly passed one of the most comprehensive and innovative education reform laws in the nation. The legislation came in response to a Kentucky Supreme Court ruling resulting from a school finance lawsuit that sought to obtain more equitable funding for Kentucky school districts. The state supreme court ruled the entire educational system unconstitutional and ordered the Kentucky General Assembly to restructure completely the public education system, including curriculum, governance, and finance. With the assistance of national consultants, the legislature developed and passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which took effect in July 1990.

The curriculum section of KERA, authored primarily by consultant David Hornbeck, embodied much of the current thinking about school reform. Designed as an assessment-driven reform, KERA freed schools of most curriculum mandates and set forth goals that schools must achieve. The goals were further defined into a set of 57 "academic expectations." The goals and expectations place a heavy emphasis on thinking, problem-solving, and real-life application of skills. A performance-based assessment program developed for Kentucky measures school progress toward KERA goals and expectations. Schools that reach the goal defined by the state receive financial rewards, while schools that fail to meet their goals are subject to varying levels of sanctions. All schools, except those in one-school districts and those that have met their established goals on the assessment, must form school-based decision-making (SBDM) councils consisting of the principal, three teachers, and two parents to help determine how to achieve KERA goals.

In addition to the results-based components of the curriculum reforms, KERA mandated

a number of inputs aimed at eliminating student failure and ensuring that all students learn: preschool programs for at-risk and handicapped four year olds; family resource and youth services centers to help students overcome social, emotional, and physical barriers to learning; a technology program; replacement of grades K-3 with an ungraded primary program designed to eliminate early school failure by allowing students to progress through the early years of schooling at their own rate; and extended school services (e.g., extended school day, week, or year) for students who need additional time to meet the mandated outcomes.

METHODS

In the fall of 1990, the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) began a qualitative study of education reform in rural school districts, beginning with a three-month, baseline study of reactions to the law in six school districts, followed by a longitudinal study in four districts that began in the spring of 1991 and is ongoing through the year 2000. This article reports findings from the first six years of research, which included monthly visits to the school districts to conduct interviews, observations of classroom activities and key functions, and review of documents; as well as regular attendance at meetings of the Kentucky Board of Education and occasional interviews with state-level policy-makers. We draw on these findings as well as reports from other researchers who have studied KERA to identify those aspects of the reform that have worked well, as well as the components that have been problematic.

POSITIVE RESULTS

Reform Has Maintained Momentum

To the surprise of many, the Kentucky Education Reform Act has remained substantially intact and relatively well-funded through three governors and three legislative sessions. Momentum has been maintained, at least in part, because state policy-makers have been responsive to concerns expressed by educators and by an organized opposition movement. Their response to these concerns include delaying the most severe sanctions of the accountability program to give schools more time to implement reform, spreading the assessment over more grade levels to alleviate the burden on teachers at the tested grade levels, and permitting greater flexibility in the primary program's implementation.

The opposition movement, as in other states, has been concerned about the perceived liberal values embodied in KERA goals and expectations, as well as a focus they consider to be non-academic. State policy-makers responded to those concerns by revising the original 75 "valued outcomes" into 57 "academic expectations," revising the state curriculum framework that is built around the expectations to remove potentially offensive language and activities, and excluding from the state assessment program any testing of the KERA goals that relate to student self-sufficiency and responsible group membership (Kannapel, Moore, Coe, & Aagaard, 1995).

Momentum has also been maintained because education reform has stayed in the public limelight in Kentucky. The media has been a major player in keeping issues related to reform on the front burner in the state. During our 1996 round of interviews, about 40 percent of state-level respondents identified the increased focus on education as a major strength of KERA. The

director of a professional association remarked on the attention to reform:

> The day nobody is annoyed about education reform is the day it has died in Kentucky. When people are stirred up that means we still have their attention... Let's keep their attention, keep them stirred up and, of course, keep doing the right things. [Director of a Kentucky professional education association]

Another explanation for why reform has remained intact in spite of opposition is the poor reputation of Kentucky schools prior to KERA. During our baseline study in the fall of 1990, we found that most respondents believed that education reform was needed, and they were open to making major changes in the system (Coe & Kannapel, 1991). Even as the initial enthusiasm for reform waned over time, we found that few people were willing to see schools return to the way they were pre-KERA. A statewide survey conducted in 1996 for the Kentucky Institute on Education Research (KIER) found that the majority of school board members, school administrators, teachers and parents who have served on school councils believe schools have changed for the better as a result of KERA (Wilkerson & Associates, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c).

Increased and More Equalized Funding

Funding under KERA, made possible by an increase in the state sales tax and corporate tax as well as more stringent local funding requirements, greatly increased the flow of dollars into school districts from both state and local sources. During the 1990-91 school year, about $500 million new dollars were provided to Kentucky school districts (Augenblick, 1991). The state Office of Education Accountability (1996) reported that state and local revenue for school districts increased 57 percent from 1989-90 to 1995-96, and that average per pupil revenue from state and local sources increased from $3,049 in 1989-90 to $4,628 in 1994-95. In our four study

districts, we heard repeated comments over the past six years that increased funding has enabled most schools to meet their basic instructional materials needs and to offer programs that would not have been possible otherwise. An elementary teacher commented:

> I have more money in the classroom than I have ever had. When I began teaching 20 years ago, I had erasers, chalk, textbooks, and a cabinet full of Christmas cards and ribbons that the other teacher (who retired) had saved. I believe I had about $200 for the whole year to buy art supplies, tape, and things like that. Now I've got two filing cabinets full of units and lesson plans. It's wonderful.

In addition to increased funding, the distribution of education dollars has become more equitable since the passage of KERA. The Office of Education Accountability reported in 1996 that the difference in average state and local revenue per pupil between schools districts in the lowest wealth quintile compared to the highest quintile had decreased from $1380 in 1989-90 to $764 in 1993-94.

Instructional and Curricular Change

Since the passage of KERA, instructional and curricular change has occurred in Kentucky schools, largely in response to the assessment, accountability, and primary program mandates. The most conspicuous and widely-reported change is a much greater emphasis on writing and the writing process to help prepare students for writing portfolios and open-response questions that are part of the state assessment program (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1994; Bridge, Compton-Hall, & Cantrell, 1996; Kelley & Protsik, 1996; Koretz, Barron, Mitchell, & Stecher, 1996; Western Michigan University, 1995). Koretz et al (1996) also found that Kentucky eighth-grade math teachers reported increasing their instructional emphasis on math communications and problem solving. Studies of the primary program, including our own,

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report that primary teachers changed their practices to include less seatwork and drill and more writing, authentic literature, and flexible room arrangements (Aagaard, Coe, Moore, & Kannapel, 1994; Institute on Education Reform, 1993; Whitford, 1993).

In 1996, many principals, teachers, and parents in our study identified the increased emphasis on writing, which results from the strong written component of the assessment, as a key strong point of KERA. Several educators spoke of how KERA has stimulated change in instructional practices and made them better teachers. A high school math teacher remarked:

> It has forced teachers to use different strategies. I didn't realize how much I was in the doldrums. KERA forced me to look at my classroom and understand that I could improve and I strived to do that. I feel that I'm the best teacher that I've ever been in 22 years and I really have to thank KERA for that. I know KERA gets a lot of flack, and there are things I don't like about it, but I really do think it has improved me as a teacher.

A parent council member also spoke of how much she liked the new instructional approaches under KERA:

> [KERA] is hands-on and that's what I like about KERA--[students] can do the things that interest them and they're learning.... I'll give you an example: In my daughter's high school art class, they just recently were given the task of drawing up what they would like to see done to the high school. She came home telling me about one boy in the class, he'd drawn the school up and had taken away the front walkway and he put windows in the school, he had landscaped, put a sign up in front with the flag and the whole deal. The teacher said something about taking it to the facilities committee. I think that would be great... When I was in school, like in Algebra class, we would do something [and wonder], when are we ever going to use this? Any time that you can show them a practical application of that, the more the better. That's what I think KERA is trying to address, to show these kids the relevance of what they're learning.

Perceived Increases in Student Learning

As a corollary to instructional changes resulting from KERA, we have heard regular reports from teachers and parents that instructional changes under KERA have resulted in improved student learning. Most commonly, educators and parents report that student writing skills have improved dramatically since KERA took effect. A 5th/6th grade teacher commented:

> My students write much better than they did. I taught 3rd and 4th grade 20 years ago. There's no comparison. They are writing better. I see in my own children who are high school level. They write better than I did coming out of high school, and that's wonderful. I think the writing is a plus.

We have also heard reports that students' abilities to think creatively and critically have improved, often as a result of having to explain their thought processes in writing. Raths and Fanning, in a 1993 study of nine schools implementing the primary program, found that teachers reported that children who had been in the primary program were writing more, were better informed, and better able to use what they had learned. The 1996 surveys conducted for the KIER found that over 65 percent of school professionals and parents who serve on school councils, as well as over 50 percent of the general public, perceive that students' abilities to write and apply their knowledge have improved under KERA (Wilkerson & Associates, 1997b; 1997c).

Family Resource/Youth Services Centers

KERA mandated that family resource centers (for elementary schools) or youth services centers (middle and high schools)--commonly referred to as FRYSCs-- be established in or near

each school in which 20 percent or more of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The goal of the centers is to help students overcome barriers to learning that emanate from outside the school. Initially, many people thought that cost and opposition from conservative groups would cause the centers to be the first KERA component to be eliminated. In reality, FRYSCs appear to be one of the most successful components of the reform legislation. A 1993 study of 10 FRYSCs found them to be vital elements of the school community, led by dedicated and capable leaders, and having an impact on children, families, and the school community (Kalafat & Illback). A follow-up study of 12 randomly selected centers in 1994 found that "FRYSCs are highly cost-efficient, school-based, family-oriented, multiservice programs," and that none of the centers could be classified as dysfunctional, poorly operated, or "in trouble" (Cannon, Kalafat, & Illback, p. 20). The Office of Education Accountability reported in 1996 that, despite administrative turmoil in the FRYSC program at the state level, local center coordinators, school administrators, parents, and teacher continue to be positive about the impact of the centers on families and children. Some of the most frequently observed activities reported by OEA staff in their visits to over 30 school districts were coordination of health services, educational and recreational summer camps, anti-drug and alcohol seminars, parenting skills training, employment and career counseling, pregnancy prevention programs, child care services, and family crisis counseling.

Only one of the four AEL study districts has had family resource and youth services centers in place at several schools for several years. We have heard frequent reports in this district and at the state level over the past six years that the centers have been very beneficial. An elementary school principal in one of our study schools commented:

> Money has been allocated through establishing family resource centers or youth service centers at every school. It's unbelievable the things that our family resource center has done, providing just the basic needs, the clothing and food and things to some families that need it all the time. They didn't have anywhere else to turn in the past. It has made a big difference having a nurse here on staff. As we send surveys home to parents [asking] what are some of the things they would like for us to continue, the nurse always comes back number one. They believe more in her than they do, I guess maybe, some doctors.

School-Level Decision Making

Over the six-year period of AEL involvement in the four study districts, we have observed a noticeable shift in decision making from the central office to the school level. Decisions in a variety of key areas have devolved to the school level, including configuration of the primary program, professional development, technology, textbook selection, and overall school improvement. Typically, these decisions are now made by committees of school-level administrators and teachers.

This is not to say that decisions have devolved to school-based decision making (SBDM) councils, which include parent representatives. A symposium of researchers independently studying SBDM in Kentucky agreed that many decisions are now made at the school level regardless of whether or not SBDM councils are in place (Coe, David, Kannapel, Kay, Lindle, Pankratz, Stearns, Van Meter, & Wagner, 1997). In some of the schools we studied, SBDM councils were key decision makers at their schools, but this was not true across the board. Often, the councils merely signed off on plans developed by committees of teachers and principals. Even so, it can be said that teachers and principals are considerably more involved in making decisions that affect their schools than was true pre-KERA.

CRITICAL ISSUES

State Testing and Accountability

The assessment and accountability programs have been controversial since their inception, largely because schools are held accountable for student performance on the newly-developed, largely performance-based testing instrument. Several studies, including our own, have noted positive outcomes of the testing and accountability programs, including increased expectations for students, greater emphasis on writing and open-ended problem solving exercises, and the addition of new content to the curriculum, such as arts and humanities (Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, & Moore, 1996; Kelly & Protsik, 1996; Koretz, Barron, Mitchell, & Stecher, 1996).

At the same time, problems with the new system have abounded, many of them a by-product of the fact that the phase-in timelines of the legislation necessitated that implementation of assessment and accountability system occur simultaneously with its development. Two independent evaluations of the testing and accountability programs, while commending the state for its efforts to develop a performance-based assessment program, raised serious questions about the technical adequacy, reliability and validity of the instrument, particularly in light of its role in judging school success for accountability purposes (Hambleton, Jaeger, Koretz, Linn, Millman, & Phillips, 1995; Western Michigan University, 1995). KIER surveys conducted in 1996 found that, while fewer than 20 percent of respondents wanted to return to pre-KERA assessment practices, over 40 percent of all role groups who were intimately involved with school functioning believed the current program needs substantial changes. Interestingly, only one-fourth of the parents and general public said the assessment needs substantial changes

(Wilkerson & Associates, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c).

In a 1996 round of interviewing with 136 people in our four study districts and 33 people working in education organizations at the state level, we found greater consensus about problems associated with state testing and accountability than about any other issue relative to KERA. About half of both state and local respondents listed the assessment program as a weak point of KERA. In fact, a count of the total number of KERA strengths and weaknesses identified by study respondents revealed that slightly more strengths than weaknesses were identified (633 to 547), but when assessment-related responses were eliminated from the data, the number of identified strengths outnumbered weaknesses 598 to 275.

Concerns at the state level tended to be more general than at the local level, typically along the lines of acknowledging a credibility problem with the assessment and a need to more strongly establish its validity. A state board member commented:

> How we do assessment is something that is still very brittle. One of the problems with assessment as I see it, is that there isn't even a national understanding of assessment and agreement on what is good assessment. We've had two sets of people look at this with all kinds of different ideas. Nationally the leaders haven't agreed. So it's very hard for us to get something that everybody's going to coalesce behind, but somehow we've got to make it acceptable.

Our local respondents had more specific complaints, many of which focused on the portfolio component of the assessment program. While we have frequently been told that work on portfolios has improved students' writing abilities, we have also heard that portfolios detract from other content and are generally time-consuming. Studies by the RAND corporation in both Kentucky and Vermont (Koretz et al, 1996: Koretz, Stecher, & Deibert, 1992) also reported that teachers have trouble finding time to manage portfolios and teach the full curriculum. In

addition, on the 1996 KIER survey, the largest number of teachers who responded to an open-ended question asking for suggested revisions to the assessment program suggested that there be a reduction in the time spent on portfolios (Wilkerson & Associates, 1997c). A 3rd/4th grade teacher at a very small school in our study explained:

> I've had to cut out some of the curriculum I used to teach due to the fact that there's so much writing now. We may have not had, say, science and social studies to the extent we did before and it shows on our tests--down it goes... The writing here doesn't work for me in that I have no help... I have to conference with them... How am I supposed to conference one-on-one with one child out of 22 when there are 21 out there that need me? Now that makes my stomach hurt.

In our study districts and elsewhere across the state, local educators say it is unfair to judge school improvement by comparing two different groups of students rather than tracking the same group over time (Kelley & Protsik, 1996; Koretz et al, 1996; Western Michigan University, 1995). A central office administrator in one of our study districts remarked:

> I think assessment is the biggest concern that I have. The fact that we have two testing years and you are not testing the same kids. Any teacher will tell you that there are differences between one year of fourth graders and the next year of fourth graders. Here we are with five of our schools in rewards based on what those kids did the last time, and you have no idea of what the next two years are going to bring as to their skills and even their ability. It gets scary about what could happen, that we may see more sanctions flying in the next biennium. We are judged just against ourselves, [but] we don't know what ourselves are going to be for the next two years.

We heard other complaints about the assessment from our local respondents: test validity has not been established, the test is too difficult, insufficient diagnostic information is provided, the turn-around time on receiving test results is too long, it is difficult for small schools to cover all the content that included on the assessment, and the test takes so long to complete that students become fatigued and frustrated.

There are also concerns in our study districts about the accountability program. The vast majority of educators we have talked to about this issue report that they are motivated by concern for students and a desire to do their jobs well rather than by the promise of financial rewards. Many teachers in our study and others (Abelmann & Kenyon, 1996; Kelley & Protsik, 1996; Western Michigan University, 1995) concede that the threat of sanctions is a motivator, but in the negative sense. Furthermore, they resent the legislation's implication that this sort of threat is necessary. Other concerns about the accountability program reported to us and to Abelmann and Kenyon (1996) are that rewards should not be paid as bonuses to teachers, that rewards lead to cheating, that there is no student accountability, and that rewards are divisive among school faculties. The 1996 KIER surveys found that more respondents in all groups disagreed than agreed that the accountability index is a fair representation of school performance (Wilkerson & Associates, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c).

Finding Time for Reform

We have heard persistent and frequent reports that reform implementation takes more time than is available during the school day and year. The Kentucky Institute for Education Reform statewide survey in 1995 reported that the top priority identified by teachers as needing attention was to provide them with more time for the design of curriculum and instruction (Wilkerson & Associates, 1995). A special education teacher in one of our study districts remarked:

> I feel like the biggest problem that I have had is just finding the time to pull it all together. I look back and I think, gosh, people really had it easy when you took a book and you taught out of that book and that was all you did. My kitchen table is stacked this tall with all these different materials that I'm trying to pull from. Everybody else is doing the same thing because I see us all going home with these big tote bags loaded down everyday.

Other time-consuming activities include professional development, assessment activities, and serving on school committees. A fourth-grade teacher commented:

> KERA is definitely a business. I don't feel like I'm a teacher in a classroom any longer. I spend as much time preparing for site-based council meetings, the reports for those, meeting with committees, meeting with parents. That really pulls from your class time. I'm usually here from 6:30 in the morning till around--at least one night a week, I'm here till 9:00. The other days it's 5:00 or 6:00 when I leave. I just feel like it's overwhelming and that it takes my energy from being the best teacher that I can be. For KERA to really be successful and to work I can see where all these things are necessary, but I just feel like it's detrimental to what the teachers are able to do for the children.

The Primary Program

Many educators in our study districts have had trouble from the beginning in the implementation of the ungraded primary program. State law requires that schools include seven critical attributes in the primary program: developmentally appropriate educational practices, multi-age and multi-ability classrooms, continuous progress, authentic assessment, qualitative reporting methods, professional teamwork, and positive parent involvement. In the four study districts, most primary teachers appeared to focus their attention most strongly on the multi-age, multi-ability requirement as an end in itself rather than seeing it as a tool to help students progress at their own rate. They have found it difficult to manage varying age- and skill-levels in their classrooms, while also changing their instructional practices, maintaining records for authentic assessment and qualitative reporting, finding time to meet and plan with their

colleagues, and developing strategies for parent involvement.

The problem has been exacerbated by the disjuncture between the primary program and the intermediate grades. The primary program has been driven by external mandates focused on teacher inputs aimed at creating a student-centered environment in which students progress at their own rate. Fourth grade, by contrast, is an accountable testing grade where instructional practices are driven by the assessment program, and students are expected to demonstrate acquisition of certain standards. Over the course of our study, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers have repeatedly complained that students come to them from the primary program unprepared for the rigorous expectations of the intermediate grades. With the imposition of rewards and sanctions, primary teachers have been under even greater pressure to focus more strongly on the assessment. The combination of this pressure, teacher uncertainty about the primary program philosophy, and the difficulties of managing a continuous progress model has resulted in primary teachers at most study schools, over time, placing less emphasis on the critical attributes and returning to more traditional approaches.

Other researchers studying the primary program in Kentucky have also found its implementation to be problematic. The Institute on Education Reform has conducted annual evaluations of the primary program since 1993. The evaluations have consistently found that teachers have had difficulty implementing instructional practices that allow for continuous progress, such as learning centers, flexible grouping practices, and student-directed activities (Institute on Education Reform, 1993, 1994, 1995). The 1995 study found a significant decrease in the percentage of teachers who were providing for the continuous progress of students.

In spite of these problems, there does not seem to be consensus on what should be done

about the primary program. The 1996 KIER surveys found that the largest percentage of respondents in each role group believed the primary program should continue as it is with only minor modifications, although teachers were nearly evenly divided on the issue. A majority of school board members and school administrators agreed that multi-age grouping is a sound educational strategy that would work for most teachers if they were trained to use it, but teachers and school council parents were more divided on that point (Wilkerson & Associates, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c).

Perceived Loss of Basic Skills

Increasingly over the past six years, educators and parents across the state and in our study districts have expressed concern that students might not be learning "basic skills." They attribute their concerns either to changed instructional strategies in the primary program or to the emphasis on writing and process skills in the assessment program, which has left little time for teaching content skills and knowledge. The 1995 KIER statewide survey found general agreement among parents and professionals that the heavy emphasis on communication and thinking processes under KERA shortchanges students on important content (Wilkerson & Associates, 1995). In addition, a panel of assessment specialists evaluating the assessment program recommended that the shift toward process at the expense of content be reconsidered to ensure that the impact on instruction is positive (Hambleton et al, 1995).

The "basic skills" that have been most neglected, according to participants in our study, are related to writing mechanics, such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Teachers and parents alike are dismayed that, although students have improved in creative writing abilities,

their writing assignments contain frequent mechanical errors. We also have heard reports that students are not learning math facts in the primary program because the new instructional approaches de-emphasize drill and rote practice. Currently, only anecdotal evidence suggests a decline in basic skills learning, indicating a need for more research in this area.

Parent Involvement

Early in our study of KERA, there seemed to be an understanding at the local level that a goal of KERA was to increase parent involvement in education. Several aspects of the reform law emphasized this, such as required parent participation on superintendent screening committees, on school-based decision-making councils, and in the primary program. As our study progressed, it appeared that schools were placing less emphasis on parent involvement than they had initially. Parents serving on SBDM councils were often left out of the information network, school committees were typically dominated by teachers, and many schools made less effort over time to involve parents in the primary program. Generally, the role of parents and the community seemed to have receded in the minds of educators.

Other research on various aspects of KERA suggests that sustained parent involvement has been as difficult to achieve statewide as it has in our study districts. The SBDM researchers' group convened by KIER found that full parent participation in SBDM had not been attained (Coe et al, 1997). The Institute for Education Reform's annual studies of the primary program reported in 1993 and 1994 that few of the teachers studied were involving parents in a meaningful way, although the percentage of teachers who were involving parents in evaluating their children's progress increased in 1995. Kalafat & Illback's 1993 evaluation of FRYSCs

reported that, while center coordinators aimed to increase parent involvement, many felt that teacher resistance to meaningful parent involvement was a barrier to that goal.

CONCLUSIONS

When we began our study in 1990, many educators were excited that something was finally being done about Kentucky schools, and that the legislature had taken the unprecedented step of funding a reform effort at a significant level. In 1997, after several years of trying to change their way of doing business, many educators are feeling frustrated and exhausted with the effort, and parents and school board members are struggling to understand how this new approach to education will make life better for students.

In the face of the current struggle, it is important to maintain a balanced picture of what KERA has and has not done for public schools in Kentucky. Funding for education has increased and become more equalized. Much of the negative political activity at the school district level has abated. Important decisions about students are now being made at the school level. There is general enthusiasm for family resource/youth services centers. Teachers have changed their methods in response to the primary program and the assessment, and students' writing and thinking skills have reportedly improved.

At the same time, there are several problems facing the reform effort. There is a need to more strongly establish the validity of the assessment, to address the burdensome nature of the portfolio program, and to consider whether or not the rewards and sanctions program is providing the sort of motivation that is desired. Research is needed on the outcomes of the primary program and on whether or not students are actually losing "basic skills" under KERA

and if so, what those basic skills are and how the loss of those skills are likely to affect students over the long-term. The question of how to provide teachers with enough time to implement reform, although perplexing, must be addressed. There may be a need to supplement current mandates for parental involvement with requirements for a full-scale state and local effort to keep parents regularly informed about reform efforts, as well as professional development for educators aimed at increasing their receptivity to substantive parent involvement and improving their knowledge of how to increase parental involvement.

In spite of the problem areas with KERA, it is beginning to appear that there is no turning back from the reform effort. Regardless of legislative and regulatory changes that may be made in the future, it is not likely that many educators will be willing to return entirely to a system in which they work in isolation in their classrooms teaching isolated skills, attend meaningless workshops, scrounge for materials, and settle for instructional and programmatic planning imposed from on high. KERA has clearly reached the school level in a way that most reform efforts have failed to do. A state legislator summed up the Kentucky experience:

> Education reform and educational changes have been incredibly faddish. For the past one-hundred years, every time we turn around there's another educational theory... What happens is the top, the leadership, is like the ocean surface: lots of waves and storms and everything that's spewing and fighting and carrying on. The classroom is the bottom of the ocean: it's calm, it's quiet, and they're kept in the dark. The effect of all this surface action seldom is felt down at the bottom. What makes this reform so different is that for eight years--1990 through January 1, 1998 [when the next legislative session convenes], the fundamental reforms [will] have stayed in place with a consistent sense of direction. Finally, those changes are beginning to be felt down at the bottom of the ocean. I think now we're beginning to see those in the classroom more aware, more saying that these changes are real, we're going to stick with this for a while. Maybe then the minds will open and the motivation to learn will be greater. Maybe then those who are the administrators and superintendents and board members will say, "We fought the fight and it's time to say that these are the rules and let's make them work."

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